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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DOHA 000979

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [KSAC](#) [EAIR](#) [QA](#)

SUBJECT: QATAR AIRWAYS U.S. FLIGHTS - GETTING SECURITY RIGHT

Classified By: CDA Michael A. Ratney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Barely two months after the inauguration of direct Doha to U.S. flights via Qatar Airways, an assessment by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) inspectors found several major areas of concern for the flights, including insufficient passenger screening, particularly for women, a lack of supervisor oversight, and questions over hold baggage screening. The TSA team also observed wider problems at the airport, most notably lax screening of transfer passengers and an absence of screening for transfer baggage. While these concerns may not have a direct impact on the U.S.-bound flights, they are a potential threat to European and other countries.

12. (C) These problems are compounded by erratic security department management at Qatar Airways and the carrier's domination of the aviation sector, which leaves the Civil Aviation Authority relatively feckless. The Ministry of Interior police have primary screening responsibility but are short-staffed and suffer from a lack of motivation. Post has worked with TSA to engage the GOQ and carrier on multiple levels to highlight U.S. concerns and find sustainable solutions. TSA has noted significant improvements in screening but the challenge remains ensuring sustainability when inspectors are not present. Growing the carrier and police into full security responsibility will take time; using a private firm with police supervision to handle everyday screening may provide a short-term fix to ensure the security of U.S. flights. END SUMMARY.

SCREENING PROBLEMS WITH U.S. FLIGHTS

13. (C) Direct Qatar Airways flights from Doha to Newark (via Geneva) started in July, and from Doha to Washington-Dulles non-stop in August. A TSA visit to observe and assist with the flights' start-up was extended to a three-week effort to help Qatar Airways and the police establish sustainable screening procedures. TSA sent a two-person inspection team back to Doha in mid-September to conduct a 60-day follow-up assessment, during which it was clear that problems with passenger and baggage screening persisted. TSA inspectors have remained in Doha to conduct daily observation of the direct Dulles flight and in several instances have intervened to correct screening inadequacies.

14. (C) The TSA team found that sustainability of screening to U.S. standards was a major problem and specifically identified the following problems:

-- The Ministry of Interior police have primary responsibility for screening but they suffer from staffing shortages and a lack of trainers, supervisors, and screeners familiar with U.S. and/or ICAO standards.

-- Supervisor oversight is weak to non-existent and there is usually no intervention when police are not screening correctly.

-- Screening of female passengers is often cursory or done incorrectly. Female police screeners wear abayyas, making it harder to do proper screening.

-- Screeners often allow contamination of baggage - i.e., a screened passenger accesses his/her luggage before it is screened, or a screened bag is given back to an unscreened passenger.

-- The layout of the economy-class gate for the Dulles flight causes congestion which can lead to screening mistakes.

-- The premier terminal (i.e. exclusive for first- and business-class passengers) gate for the Dulles flight currently utilizes a bus that has been transformed into a mobile checkpoint. However, the metal in the bus and the heat from the outdoor environment render the metal detector and the X-ray machine useless. This necessitates physical searches of all passengers and luggage, which are then subject to the same problems noted above.

-- Checked baggage screening appears lax; for example, the TSA inspectors entered the baggage screening facility without

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notice and observed the ostensible baggage screener reading a

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newspaper instead of watching the X-ray machine.

-- Aircraft search teams usually only do a cursory check. On a recent day when the TSA team observed aircraft search procedures, the carrier's team took over an hour searching the aircraft. However, when TSA examined the carrier's training records, they found that on all other days the team completed their search in less than half that time.

WIDER ISSUES WITH DOHA AIRPORT

15. (C) Although screening for the U.S. flights is problematic, Doha International Airport as a whole faces much wider security issues. The most serious concerns noted by the TSA team and Emboffs include:

-- Transfer passengers often receive only cursory screening or are not screened at all. For example, on several days TSA witnessed police officers waving large numbers of transfer passengers through the metal detectors.

-- Originating passenger baggage is screened in the general terminal area and then given back to the passengers, allowing for contamination of the baggage.

-- Transfer baggage not going to the United States is not screened.

-- Security screening of liquids, gels, and aerosols per ICAO mandate is rarely initiated or enforced.

BUREAUCRATIC AND MANAGEMENT DISARRAY

16. (C) Based on Post's observation of the aviation sector,

security appears to be an afterthought for both the GOQ and the carrier. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) employs only one security advisor (a British expatriate formerly with ICAO) but he is not empowered and in fact has never met the Chairman of the CAA. While the CAA legally has an overall aviation role, Qatar Airways has control over the airport and together with the police makes the decisions and appears to have the prerogative in setting standards. Post has been unable to schedule a meeting with the CAA Chairman for over two weeks; it is unclear if this is due to typically lethargic Qatari scheduling or if he is specifically trying to avoid a meeting.

17. (C) Qatar Airways CEO Akbar Al-Baker, who dominates not only airline management, but the airport and CAA as well, wants to see the success of U.S. flights and has strong ambitions to expand the carrier into a world-class airline. However, he has a well-deserved reputation for capriciousness and micromanagement. The most problematic aspect of the carrier's security program is its complete lack of any credentialed, trained, and committed security managers. Qatar Airways employed a former British DATT in Doha as a security advisor for a six-month period but did not renew his contract when it expired in August. This advisor believes he was brought on to help the carrier through the TSA approval process and relieved once the carrier believed that hurdle had been cleared.

18. (C) The carrier's security portfolio is currently held by an Indian expat named Benny Thomas who, for reasons that are unclear, appears to have the favor of Al-Baker. Post believes Thomas exerts a poisonous influence within the carrier. For example, the former British DATT accused him of corruption (e.g., selling or doling out financially lucrative security slots on the Amiri flights to carrier employees) and incompetence (e.g., sharing his restricted access to TSA's webboard system with uncleared coworkers). Moreover, a carrier employee recently approached a TSA inspector to say that Thomas had told carrier staff to raise the level of their security operations while TSA was in Doha, but that things could go "back to normal" once the team departs. In meetings with embassy and TSA representatives, Thomas has consistently downplayed TSA concerns and sought to excuse specific failings. There are several lower-ranking third-country nationals who show motivation and knowledge of proper screening procedures, but Post believes the carrier's security management will continue to be impaired until Thomas

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is removed.

EMBASSY AND TSA ENGAGEMENT

19. (C) Given the concerns outlined above, Post has worked closely with TSA to impress upon Qatari officials the gravity of the security situation and work with Qatari interlocutors to find sustainable ways to bring screening for U.S. flights up to standard and improve the overall aviation security posture. TSA has noted significant improvements in screening but the challenge remains ensuring sustainability when inspectors are not present. Post's specific efforts include:

-- Charge, RSO, and a member of the TSA inspection team met with Minister of State for Internal Affairs (defacto Interior Minister) Sheikh Abdulla Bin Nassir Bin Khalifa Al Thani and separately with Director of Airport Police Brigadier Nasser Ahmed Al-Malki to convey U.S. concerns and press for improved police staffing and engagement. Sheikh Abdulla visited the airport on October 4 to observe flight operations and TSA representatives have noted increased police responsiveness since then.

-- TSA and Embassy officers have met several times with Al-Baker, including some very blunt conversations about the

implications of not improving airline security practices, and have used his influence and enthusiasm for the U.S. flights to motivate the police. One area of progress is that TSA and Al-Baker appear to have convinced the police to begin using regular uniforms for female screeners, which should make their attire more suited to their duties.

-- TSA and Econoff have worked closely with the CAA's security advisor to highlight security problems and encourage the authority to exercise its oversight and investigative authorities.

-- TSA and RSO, through the auspices of the ATA program, are pursuing expedited training courses including "Airport Security Management II" and "Quality Control in Civil Aviation Security."

-- TSA inspectors have conducted several training sessions for police supervisors and screeners, and for carrier personnel.

-- Econoff and DATT met with the British DATT in Doha to highlight the vulnerabilities inherent in the lack of transfer screening (British Airways has several flights per day between Doha and the UK). British Ministry of Transport officials recently conducted their own assessment of the airport and found many of the same problems. The British representative will be making a follow up visit by the end of the year which will allow for further scrutiny and pressure on the GOQ. Econoff is following up with other European countries with direct flights from Doha to try to widen the front of countries pressuring the GOQ for change.

-- TSA Administrator Kip Hawley called and wrote a letter to Al-Baker to underscore U.S. concerns.

POST THINKING ON A WAY FORWARD

¶10. (C) Direct Qatar Airways flights to the United States help foster the growing U.S. business ties with Qatar and are an important and tangible boon to the bilateral relationship.

Al-Baker has recently shown a preference for U.S. aircraft and the present all-Airbus fleet will be diversified starting this November when the carrier begins to take delivery of Boeing 777s. The flights are also an important political showpiece for the Amir and a key component of Qatar Airways' expansion plans. Clearly, the GOQ at the highest levels wants these flights, and they are important to the U.S. as well. The dilemma is that security just has not been an area of concern for the GOQ and the carrier. Post's Qatari interlocutors are beginning to get the message that this is a serious USG concern with potential major ramifications. However, due to the primary role of the Qatari police in airport security - and the requirement that those police be trained, motivated, and competent - Qatar has reached the limits of what money can buy. Further, Al-Baker's mercurial

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management style has created a carrier whose operations are "held together with sticky tape," in the words of the British former advisor. In sum, Qatar's aviation woes extend far beyond what the U.S. can affect by working around the margins on U.S. flights only.

¶11. (C) Post's primary concern remains ensuring the security of U.S. flights. Post and TSA representatives concur that further training via ATA and TSA-specific programs is important though unlikely to be fully effective given the sustainability and staffing issues noted above. Post's efforts thus far have centered on two areas. First, the police need to provide a dedicated team of trained screeners and supervisors for U.S. flights and develop a training program with personnel that meet U.S. and ICAO standards. We continue to press this message with Qatari interlocutors and

support the TSA team as they work to identify and train proper staff. Second, until the GOQ and carrier achieve a more comprehensive level of security awareness, they should employ a private security firm to handle screening. There are several firms that meet ICAO standards which could quickly deploy to Doha. Al-Baker appears to favor this idea but the police are obviously reluctant due to their primary role in screening. Post and TSA will continue to work to press a compromise that would give immediate control to a professional company but allow the police the chance to grow into the role of screening.

¶12. (U) TSA Representative Dan Furlong and TSA Inspector Edward O'Loughlin cleared this message.
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